

## Sermon for Sunday 7 January 2024 – The Epiphany

Pete Postle, Reader

*Isaiah 60.1-6; Psalm 72.10-15; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12*

May all I think and say, always be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. So, Epiphany, well, one day late actually, Epiphany from the greek for a manifestation; the manifestation, the presentation, that is, of the baby Jesus to the Magi, the three kings, but most significantly, the presentation of Jesus to the Gentiles, so that Jesus's words are for all humanity. Just take a moment to read back through that letter from Paul to the Ephesians and you'll see how he, Paul, is emphasising that we Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of that same body with the Jews, sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. And those Old Testament and New Testament readings are interrelated, for the reading from Isaiah can certainly be interpreted as alluding to the star of Bethlehem, both astronomically speaking and also metaphorically, Jesus as the light and the glory of the world. Because if one reads on in Isaiah, he pictures a world in darkness until the coming of an incandescent light that illuminates this central figure. Suddenly the world is filled with joy and laughter, and the central character starts to sing a hymn. And you'll know this hymn, 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.'

Some research suggests that the Magi were from Medes, ancient Persia, modern Iran, possibly Zoroastrian priests. Well, I could go on for some time there, but I prefer the very lengthy article about them in Wikipedia, which begins, 'A group of distinguished foreigners who visited Jesus after his birth'. And I'll leave you to read it. I warn you, it's a very long article on the three. So these people, 3, 12, or as the Church times cartoon said two weeks ago, perhaps just the one, because the others were working from home. They were philosophers, interpreters of dreams, astrologers, men of letters, you might say. Now, Astrology was a perfectly respectable pursuit in those days. Many believed it was through the stars their gods spoke to them. So it was that the wise men were looking for and identified an astronomical or astrological event, that star, that to them heralded the long expected birth of a great leader, a king. For example. In Suetonius's roman history, life of Vespasian, we find there has spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world; or if you prefer, from the book of Micah, the one that the chief priests and scribes quote to Herod, 'But you, O Bethlehem, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me, one who is to rule in Israel'. And Micah goes on, 'and he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God, and they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be the one of peace'.

That star. Over the years, various theories have been put forward. My favourite is that between 5 and 2 BC, Sirius, the dog star, rose at sunrise on the first day of the Egyptian month, Messori, and would have shone with particular brilliance. Why do I like Messori? Because Messori is the month that ends on New Year's day, and Messori means the birth of a prince. Now then, there's the background, there's the history.

Let me reflect on a comparison with modern times. The New Testament is written in hellenistic times, Greek and then Roman occupations. Starting in 3/4 BC, Alexander the Great had conquered and created a huge empire from Greece in the west through to the borders of India in the east and down to the eastern Mediterranean and to Egypt in the south.

When he came to the temple in Jerusalem, the priests came out to meet him. It is said that Alexander dismounted and bowed to them. And it is the case that Alexander remains a favourite Jewish forname. Now, Alexander was a pupil of Aristotle, who in turn had been a pupil of Plato, who in turn had been a pupil of Socrates. So it is for its philosophy and its architecture that we remember the Hellenistic Empire. Remember the Elgin marbles and the Parthenon, for example. And it is one indication of how that huge empire was run, that travelled by the Magi from Iran south through Syria to Bethlehem, was normal and perfectly feasible. Why Greece was the common language at the time, even though by now the Roman Empire had now taken over. Why St Paul, a Roman citizen, born in Syria, is able to travel throughout most of Alexander's empire to spread the gospel, working without visa or passport or asylum application, at his job of tent-maker, with a wage nowhere near the modern equivalent of £36,700. In 2000 years from now, will our western civilization / empire be so positively remembered? Will philosophy and architecture be replaced by Amazon, Google, Starbucks, McDonald's?

Will our leaders be remembered? Recently passed, but possibly likely to return? Who employed lies and encouragement to violence? Is that where our past 2000 years of a succession of empires and powerful leaders has got us. How about Operation Prosperity Guardian? Now, that is the name of the military buildup designed to stop Houthis taking pop shots at container ships on their way to the Red Sea, by, of course, taking pop shots at the Houthis. So Operation Prosperity is very little to do with the risks to sailors' lives, more that we can be reassured. There will be huge ships docking at Felixtowe with their Chinese cargoes, as cheaply as possible; or defeating Hamas in Gaza. An Israel spokesman said on the news the other day that they are minimising civilian casualties there. Only three or four killed for every one Hamas militant killed. Since Jesus was born those 2024 years ago, we have had the advice and guidance we need to bring us nearer to the kingdom of heaven here on earth. May we hope and pray that those with a responsibility for running our civilizations live and work in accordance with that guidance.

Jesus said, 'You heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your father in heaven. For he makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Amen.

### **A story from Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector**

Just before we share the Peace, I'm going to tell you a story. As we heard, the wise men came from Persia, probably from a town called Saba, by legend. And when Marco Polo travelled across the continents to try to get to China, he came to this town called Saba and heard a beautiful story of the wise

men, which kind of accords with, but is different to the biblical story. So the story was very much the same in the beginning of the story, in that the wise men searched the stars for meaning and purpose, noticed this new star and followed where it was leading, and came indeed to Bethlehem. And they took their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But when they went in to offer their gifts, they each encountered, they went in one by one, and as each one went in, they met the Christ-child differently. So the first wise man was quite old, and when he went in, the Christ child was quite old, and the second one went in and he was more middle-aged, and the Christ child was more middle-aged. And then the young one went in, and the Christ child was young, and they were puzzled about this.

And then they realised that what they met was God who lives among us, who they were each able to relate to for who they were, so that the Christ-child was born for each one, each individual person, as we are. And they were each able to make sense of themselves when they met Christ for themselves. So that's really quite wonderful, isn't it, that we can each meet Christ for ourselves as we are, and he will be relevant to us as we are.

And then the Christ child gave them a gift to take home, and they weren't supposed to open it until they got home, but on the way back, they came to an oasis in the desert, where all the different roads across the world criss-crossed. Merchants came and went off in different directions, and there was a well there. And in their curiosity, they decided as they sat by this well one evening, to open the present. What is it that Christ has given to us? And when they opened the box, it was just a stone; it's a bit of a rubbish present, and they threw it down the well, and when it reached the bottom of the well, it burst into flames.

And these flames were so bright that all the merchants lit their lamps from this light, the light of Christ, and then took their lit lanterns to all the different corners of the world that they were going to on their merchant trading. So it's a really nice story. That's the story that they tell in Saba, in Persia, of the three wise men. So it's not the biblical story, but very much the same sort of story. So it kind of corresponds and accords and complements, doesn't it, the story that we know so well. And if we were to go to Saba today, in Persia, they would show us the tombs of the three wise men. But equally, if we went to Cologne Cathedral this morning, they would show us in Cologne Cathedral the tombs of the three wise men as well. So let you take your choice as to which one you think is most likely.